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ABSTRACT

A study examined students' reactions to the Student-Directed Discussion technique (an attempt to develop a class "text" from the students' joint construction of meaning) as used in a methods course on language development. The students (25 of 27 were present the day of the survey) responded anonymously concerning whether they thought the discussions were helpful. Results indicated that: (1) all students characterized the discussions as helpful to their learning; (2) students found the discussions helpful because it allowed them to see other perspectives; (3) sub-themes on why the discussions were helpful were clarification, motivation, and articulation of various beliefs; (4) many students chose the words "informative" or "interesting" to describe the discussions; (5) not only were the major concepts of the course brought up and discussed, but students saw concepts as more complex and problematic than previous classes; (6) students saw value in listening to others speak rather than in the opportunity to share their own thoughts; and (7) "more time" was the only problem noted by several students. (Contains nine references.) (RS)

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Researching Student-Directed Discussion: Putting "social construction of knowledge" to the test

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Background

In describing what constitutes a research paradigm, many scholars agree on the need for (1) an ontology, or theory of being; (2) an epistemology, or theory of knowing; and (3) a methodology (Sparkes, 1991). Ernest (1995) suggests adding a fourth element to that framework: (4) a pedagogy--"the means to facilitate learning according to the epistemology" (p. 466). The procedure outlined in this paper, Student-Directed Discussions, is an attempt to follow Ernest's suggestion in a methods course on language development. Informed by a constructivist understanding of teaching and learning--it is an attempt to develop a class "text" from the students' joint construction of meaning.

Received knowing vs. active knowing

Some form of this argument underlies most discussions about the "reform" potential of constructivist teaching and learning. "Received knowing" has been identified with less powerful groups such as children in traditional classrooms; women (Belenky, M.F. et al., 1986); and some members of diverse language communities, (Heath, 1983); as well as with a transmission model of teaching. However, Ernest (1995) points out the inherent contradictions and limitations of the term "received knowing" in constructivist theory. In discussing the use of the metaphor of 'construction' in constructivism, Ernest reminds us:

> What the metaphor of *construction* does not mean in constructivism is that understanding is built up from received pieces of knowledge. the process is recursive (Kieren & Pirie, 1991), and so the "building blocks" of understanding are the product of previous acts of construction. Thus the distinction between the structure and content of understanding can only be relative in constructivism. Previously built structures become the content in subsequent constructions (p. 461).

Thus, in a sense, the *participatory acts of speaking and listening* can always be understood as both method and content in a constructivist classroom.

According to Wertsch & Toma (1995), interactional research continues to credit teachers with doing 80% of the talking in classrooms. Mehan (1979) described a frequent pattern of classroom interaction where the teacher Iniates discussion; the students Reply to the initiation; and the teacher Evaluates the responses (IRE). This pervasive pattern of classroom interaction is not easily interrupted, as demonstrated by this "open-ended" dialogue observed recently during a "strategic math" lesson:.

I: What are some ways you could find.....? (R) E: Yes, that's one way, who has another? (R) E: Good...Are there more..? (R) E: Yes. (Teacher summation of answers) (Niles, 1995)

While such a lesson may have many strengths, it still does not interrupt the role of the teacher as director of discourse.

Student-Directed Discussions was developed to intentionally interrupt the power of instructor-dominated discourse by creating a "vacant space" where I and E were expected.

Procedure and implementation of SDD:
1) I assigned an article for discussion. Subsequent discussions came from chapters from our text.
2) At the next class meeting, I chose 3 "discussion leaders" at random and explained their role: begin the discussion, facilitate as needed, and close the discussion whenever it seemed appropriate.
3) I assigned myself the role of recorder. As they talked, I recorded their ideas. I did not participate in any way in the discussions.
4) After the first discussion, we reflected briefly on the process. This was not done in later discussions.
5) At the next class meeting, I summarized the main points of the discussion from my notes and wrote them on the board.
6) I used the information as a KWL--developing "my" part of the class from their questions, interests, understandings as I perceived them.

Research questions
Would students find the discussions helpful to their learning?
How would students perceive the discussions?
Would the discussions "cover" class content?

Evaluation procedure
At the end of the class I asked students to respond anonymously in 4 areas: (1) Were the discussions helpful or not helpful in their learning? Why or why not? (2) Describe the discussions with a brief word or phrase. (3) Please list any problems. (4) Please share other suggestions or feedback

In each of the 4 areas, I looked for emerging themes. I also coded each respondent as to whether listening and/or speaking aspects of the discussions were perceived as valuable. One mention of a behavior was sufficient grounds for inclusion.

Additionally, I reviewed my notes from the article discussion, the five chapter discussions, and three other class discussions.

Results
On the day of the survey, 25 of 27 students were present.

Helpful or not helpful? Why or why not?
All 25 students characterized the discussions as helpful to their learning.

The overwhelming answer to "why" it was helpful was seeing other perspectives. "I learned to see things through other people's eyes" and "heard other's input on things I believe are important." "It helped me look at a subject from different views of people." Seeing other perspectives "opened new ideas and views" and "sometimes changed my point of view." Discussions "helped me understand how other students felt about the information" and "helped me see the information in the text in a completely different light." This theme was referred to by 20 respondents.

Most students gave more than one reason for feeling the discussions were helpful, leading to the development of three sub-themes.

One sub-theme was clarification. Typical responses in this category were, "when people give examples and opinions, it makes topics clearer." Discussions assisted text interpretation by being helpful in "understanding parts of the chapter that were confusing to me"; and "my determining the important points of a chapter."

Effects on personal learning behaviors, especially motivation, comprised a second sub-theme. "I paid attention more to what was going on...I knew when we would be discussing chapters so I made sure I read them instead of waiting until the last minute." (This class) "helped me become more assertive and less passive...(it) helped me become more of a student that talks out in class. Before, I was always afraid of being wrong..." Speaking in front of people was valued because "...it's more of an incentive to read. One wants to know what is being discussed and not left out." and "It forced me to think my comments out carefully."

A third sub-theme related to students' articulation of various beliefs and values they hold about learning. These responses identified the discussions as helpful because they "meshed" with the student's understandings of the purposes of classroom learning and preferred interaction "styles". Discussions "helped me internalize information and apply it to real life." They provided "good practice in taking ownership of your ideas and opinions," and were a good place to "gather ideas from others that I probably would have never thought of." Students valued the social construction of knowledge. "I liked the text but I feel it's more beneficial to learn off of other people's experiences." "I liked listening to people's stories." "I realized others felt the same as I did," Students also valued ownership, "...the class was ours not a lecture from a prof," and having a place where "everyone presented and shared knowledge; not just the teacher lecturing and sharing info."

How did students perceive the discussions?
Many students chose the words "informative" or "interesting" to describe the discussions. Other responses included: "thought-provoking", "ice-breaking", "enlightening", "development", "peer-learning", "beneficial", "different opinions discussing a subject", "whole", "understanding other people", "insightful", "open-minded learning", "active", "sharing", "learn from others' experiences", "learning how to think", and "learning from others".

Were important class concepts adequately "covered"?
One of the important "instructor learnings" of this research was how rich the discussions were. Not only were the major concepts brought up and discussed, but students saw concepts as more complex and problematic than previous classes. Two examples of this are: (1) A class discussion on a chapter on special needs, and (2) the rubric for the portfolio.

Special needs chapter
Although this was one of the shorter discussions in terms of major points brought up (11); several important themes emerged:
* Children perform to the level of expectations.
* Labels are used primarily in schools and don't serve the same function outside of schools.
* Labels don't tell us what we want to know about children.
* Everyone has strengths and weaknesses and labels often focus on the weaknesses. This theme was enriched by a surprising number of negative personal experiences with special needs labeling including learning disability, low reading group membership, and

hearing impairment. The irony of these same people who felt they were labeled to "fail" sitting in a college class today was discussed at length.
* How can we use the labels to get special services without stigmatizing children?
* How can we focus on children's strengths?
* Is it sometimes worth foregoing the special services if the price in "diagnosis" is too heavy? Again, this discussion was almost totally driven by negative personal experiences with diagnostic personnel.

Rubric for portfolio
What impressed me about this rubic compared to previous classes was the focus on process and personal meaning:

Characteristics of a "good" portfolio...
- I learn more about myself and my topic.
- The material is useful to me.
- I experience growth.
- Others can learn from my portfolio
  ... more about me
  ... more about my topic.

Listening vs. speaking
The other important learning for me was the relative value the students gave to listening and speaking. As a speaker, I had assumed most of them would value the opportunity to share their thoughts. This was not borne out when I coded the responses. Rather, the value they saw in the discussions was clearly in listening to what others thought.

Valued opportunities to speak	2 persons
Valued opportunities to listen	16 persons
Valued both opportunities	3 persons
Unable to code on this aspect	4 persons

One student included a description of her own learning that helped me to better understand the active nature of their listening--the dialogic rather than univocal nature of this classroom "text" (Lotman, 1988).

> I tend to be somewhat quiet during class discussions simply because I don't usually participate in class, however, that does not mean I don't find them valuable. When I hear someone make their opinion known, I match that with my opinion. If they do not agree, I try to figure out why based on what I've learned. Other student's opinions will either reinforce my own beliefs or will cause me to re-think my own beliefs.

Problems and feedback
Despite my plea for negative as well as positive feedback, problems were few and far between. "More time" was the only problem noted by several people. Two people felt we sometimes got "off the topic". Only one person wanted "more instructor input"; or worried that we "might have missed some important points." One person felt we didn't need discussion leaders, and another person felt people who hadn't read the text made it "hard". Most comments simply urged me to continue the discussions. A few characterized the class as "enjoyable" and one person found it "a wonderful experience". Several students thanked me. My own favorite response was the following comment which helps me keep "my" teaching role in perspective:

"The problem was sometimes the discussions got cut off when the class was over. Maybe make discussions first on the agenda."

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